

Compared to Other Medical Specialties, Psychiatric Research is Fairly Well Represented in Recent Scientific literature from Afghanistan

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Introduction: After involvement of the international community in Afghanistan, the state of biological research has substantially improved in the country. As a measure of such improvement, here we have looked at the Pubmed indexed articles to assess psychiatric research in Afghanistan. We hypothesized that since trauma and suffering have received international attention, compared to other medical specialties research addressing psychiatric disorders in Afghan population should be higher. **Methods:** We searched Pubmed database with key words (alone and combinations) “Afghanistan”; “Afghan”; “mental illness”; “Substance”; “Opium”; “Heroin”; “PTSD”; “Posttraumatic Stress disorder”; and “Suicide” with a yield of over 3800 articles. Abstracts of the articles were reviewed for their classification: whether they were about foreign military forces in Afghanistan or about Afghan people (both living in native land as well as immigrants). **Results:** The change in number of articles (pre-2001 to post-2001 ear) originating from Afghanistan has significantly increased compared to neighboring countries or countries with similar socioeconomics (Tajikistan $p < 0.001$; Uzbekistan $p < 0.001$; Turkmenistan $p < 0.001$; Iraq $p < 0.02$; Nepal $p < 0.004$). **Articles first authored by an Afghan researcher has increased 16-folds.** **Conclusion:** There seem to be fair representation of psychiatric issues, including PTSD and mood disorders. However, suicidality—the most pertinent issue remains unstudied. Outreach from international, especially, USA-based organization (the American Psychiatric Association and Society of Biological Psychiatry) will undoubtedly improve evidence-based practice of psychiatry in Afghanistan.

Background:

- Medical literature originating from Afghanistan has been scant until recently. After USSR involvement, there was minimal improvement in medical literature in the country. In post-Taliban ear and after international coalition interviewed, there has been a surge in research in Afghanistan.
- There is no systematic measure of the state of medical literature in Afghanistan to identify weaknesses or strengths and future directions
- A large number of high cost projects have been carried out but the extent of the evidence generated from those project is not known.
- Systematic evaluation of current trend will not only assist identify the un-addressed issues, but also encourage current researchers in their efforts and policymakers in evidence-based decisions

Method:

Pubmed database was searched with key words (alone and combinations) “Afghanistan”; “Afghan”; “mental illness”; “Substance”; “Opium”; “Heroin”; “PTSD”; “Posttraumatic Stress disorder”; and “Suicide” with a yield of over 3800 articles. Abstracts of the articles were reviewed for their classification: whether they were about foreign military forces in Afghanistan or about Afghan people (both living in native land as well as immigrants)

Results:

- Most of the articles in post-Taliban era deal with medical issues relating to nationals of assisting country rather than Afghan people. A large number of high cost projects did not result in academic works
- Off the 3800 articles, 1232 were either about Afghanistan or Afghan people (figures 1, 2,3)
- Compared to USSR involvement, the state of medical literature has substantially improved ($t = 7.8804$; $df = 20$ The two-tailed $P < 0.0001$) after coalition forces intervened in Afghanistan.
- Surprisingly compared to Afghanistan, the Central Asian neighbors appear less active in global academic contributions (even though the GDP is higher for those countries).
 - These countries are academically less active vs. producing smaller number of English language literature
- Vulnerable progress: The medical literature pertaining to Afghans is dependent on researcher/group of researchers
- Ppsychiatric disorder fair very well compared to most specialties.
- The most studied psychiatric disorder is PTSD; among the important psychiatric entities that is least studied is suicidality
- Research of Afghanistan related literature outside of medical fields reveal that a very large number of high cost studies with valuable data are never systematically evaluated or reported in academic format

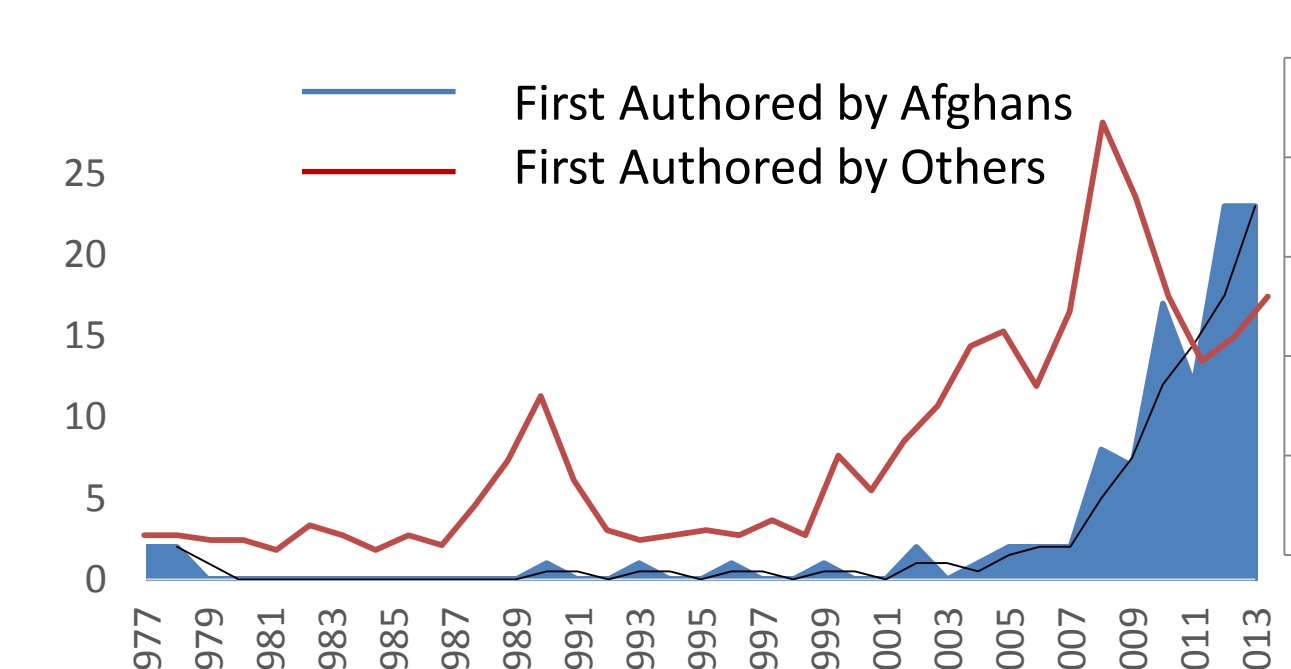
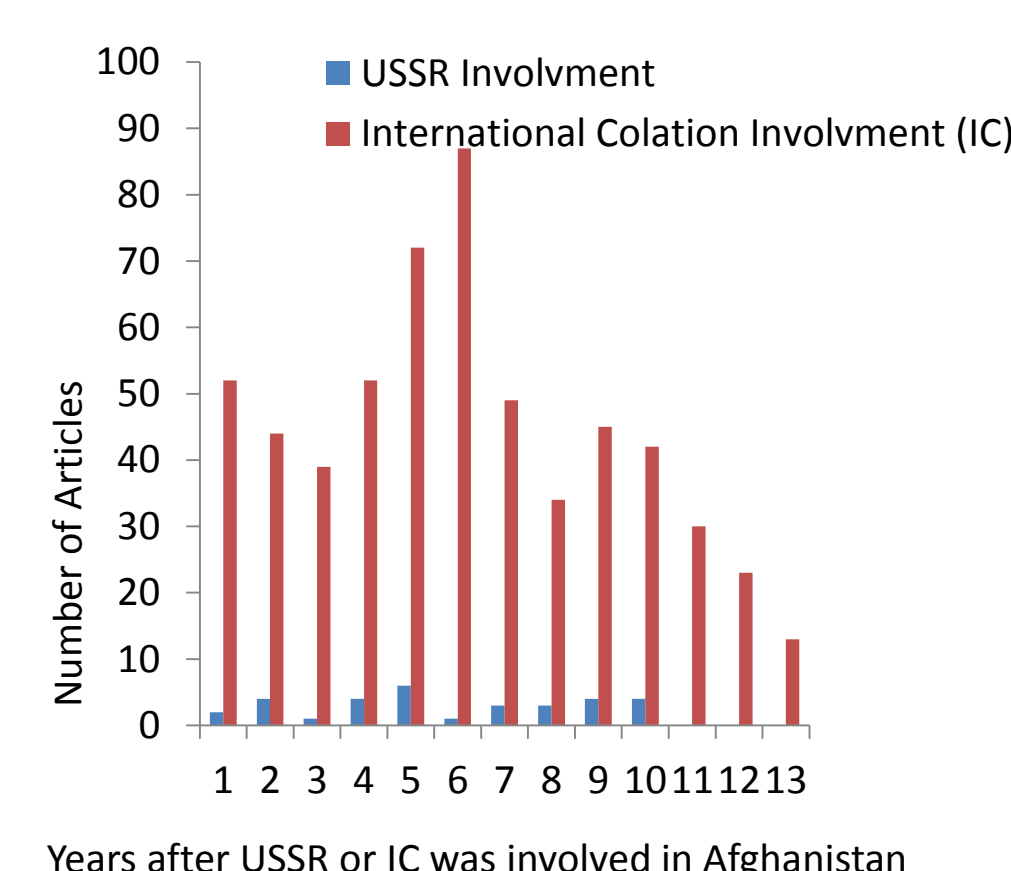


Figure 1: Trends of medical literature relating to Afghan people: increasingly larger number articles addressing Afghan population is encouraging. Vast majority of recent publication address issues related to the population were authored by non-Afghan researchers. However, in recent years, the trajectory is shifting and more Afghans are participating.



Years after USSR or IC was involved in Afghanistan

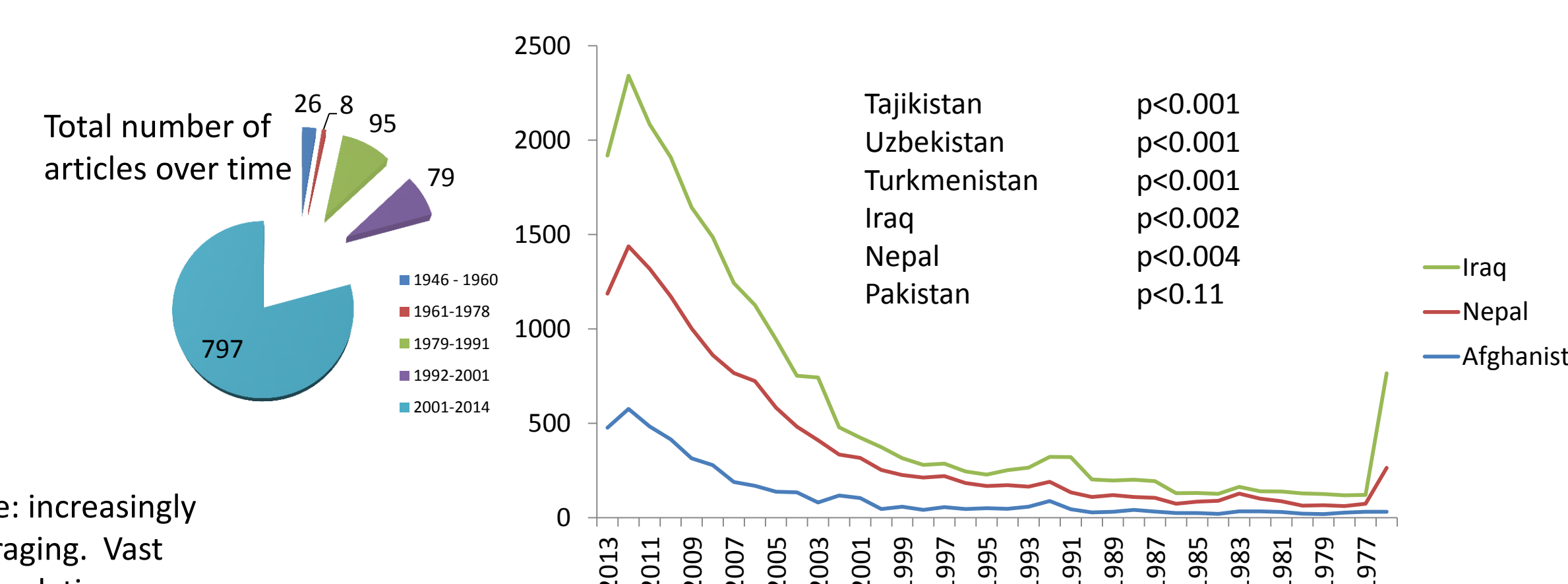


Figure 4. Compared to regional countries, in pre- vs. post-2001 periods, Afghanistan's contribution to global scientific community is significantly improved.

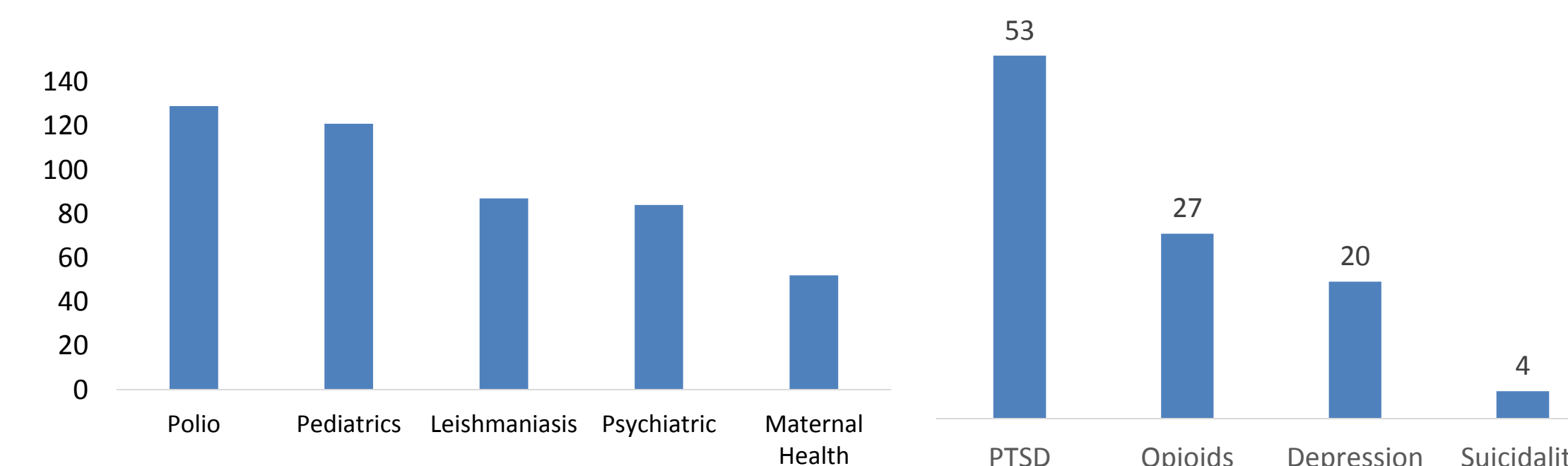


Figure 3. Most medical literature address infectious diseases and child and mother related issues. Even though psychiatric research is appreciably encouraging, suicidality remains unstudied in a country with potentially the highest rates globally.

Discussion:

- In the past 14 years, the medical literature has increased in number substantially
- Lost opportunity: some of the very high cost reports are never published as scholarly articles. They contain valuable information that can guide public health authorities and assist future studies designed to specifically address a particular issue
- Vulnerable progress: most research is conducted by a limited number of researcher; the gains could be easily lost if sustainable alternative is not sought
- Psychiatry disorders are fairly well represented, however, the selective attention to trauma related issues should be balanced with other psychiatric disorders including mood disorders and suicide
- The downward trend in the past few years is concerning (similar to post USSR involvement)

Conclusion:

- Medical and psychiatric research in past 14 years have been encouraging
- Efforts are needed so that the momentum gained is not lost
- International psychiatric organization should support Afghan psychiatrists and psychologists
- Suicide needs to be address specifically due to its high rates in Afghans

